

Thursday
December 29
1955

Page Eight

DUXBURY CLIPPER

GURNET LIGHT HAS AN INTERESTING HISTORY

"This is a beautiful spot here I should like to fix my dwelling."

Such were remarks of Thorwald, son of Eric the Red, according to an interesting legend, as he sailed through Cape Cod Bay in the Spring of 1004.

As the legend goes on, "... soon afterward he was wounded in skirmish with Indians and seeing his hurts were fatal, told his companions to carry him to the point he indicated, and bury him with a cross at his head and another at his feet."

His last remarks were: "It may be that it was a prophetic word which fell from my mouth, about abiding here for a season."

He was buried according to his wishes.

THE GURNET

Close by stands Gurnet light and as everyone from Duxbury and Plymouth will agree, it "is a beautiful spot."

Often referred to as "The Gurnet," it juts out in a long narrow point from Duxbury shore at the northern side of the entrance to Plymouth Bay.

Inhabitants of the two previously mentioned towns, according to a record dated 1678, called it "ye Gurnett's nose."

The name was derived from the gurnet fish, which abounds in great numbers on the coast of Devonshire, England.

Several headlands in the English channel bear the name and from one of these The Gurnet of Plymouth probably received its name, given it by the Pilgrims.

An act passed by the Legislature of Massachusetts authorizing building a lighthouse on Gurnet is dated Feb. 17, 1768, and is the second oldest along the Massachusetts coastline, Boston being the first. The Cape Ann light was built three years later.

The house was built and light first exhibited the following year. The structure was 30 feet long, 20 feet high and 15 feet wide and showed a light in either end, each light consisting of two lamps with four large wicks in each.

Justin Winsor's "History of Duxbury" of 1849 says that a "fort, early in 1776, was built at the Gurnet by the towns of Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury."

Although the lighthouse figured in the Revolution a few years after it was built, no attack, it is believed, was made on it during the war. A few shots, however, were exchanged with the British frigate "Niger" and one of the balls from the frigate pierced the lighthouse.

On June 10, 1790, when a Mrs. Thomas was keeper, the lighthouse was ceded to the Federal government.

It provided a premature Independence day bonfire on July 2, 1801, when it burned to the ground.

Replaced two years later, the new station, like its predecessor, showed two fixed white lights about 70 feet above water.

Some 35 years later, Nov. 1, 1838, Capt. Edward W. Carpendder, who was an inspector of lights, determined some radical changes should be made at the Gurnet.

He reported the lights "require to be double to distinguish them from the single light at Barnstable. They are in two separate towers, 22 feet high and 30 feet apart. The lights are an improvement over the original ones and consist of six lamps each, with old style reflectors, arranged in circular form so as to be seen from the harbor as well as the sea.

"The objection is they are too near together, by which they blend and appear to be a single light at short dis-

tance and, that being horizontal, they are liable to come into range with each other, by which, also, they appear single."

Capt. Carpendder proposed to eliminate objections by constructing a new light tower 60 feet high, with two lights vertically placed, one at the top and the other 15 feet from its base and outside the tower itself. He proposed a structure of stone or brick.

Had his suggestion been carried out it would have defeated its own purpose. One difficulty with lights arranged vertically is the difference in ranges of visibility. With 45 feet between the two lights, the upper light would have been visible for several more miles than the lower one, thus at the greater distance it would appear as one light.

Capt. Sturgis of the revenue cutter on Boston station wrote a letter in 1842 regarding Gurnet's condition stating "it was unworthy of repair." Stephen Pleasonton also wrote, to Hon. John P. Kennedy, chairman of the committee on commerce in the House of Representatives, "I am much afraid it will fall to the ground this summer."

NEW TOWER

In 1843 it was replaced, with a new pyramidal, octagonal tower, but still built of wood. Following many complaints that the lights were too small, and when seen from a distance resemble a dwelling house, the lights were increased in size in 1871.

Other changes were made, the lights were reduced from two to one, its characteristic made a single and double flash alternately and its intensity raised to 37,000 candlepower. It is now visible for 16 miles. Its fog signal is a first class reed horn giving a three-second blast every 15 seconds. An auxiliary bell, with double stroke every 30 seconds, is also maintained.

The light station, never important except as a guide for vessels entering or leaving Plymouth harbor, became vastly more important after 1920 because of the greater amount of traffic passing the point in running to and from the Cape Cod Canal.